



George T. Dennis, S.J.

1923–2010

ALICE-MARY TALBOT

As a longtime and active member of the Washington community of Byzantinists, it is appropriate that George Dennis be memorialized in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, in which so many of his own articles have appeared. During the thirty-five years he spent in Washington, he was associated with this institution as a fellow and senior fellow, as teacher and seminar participant, as symposium speaker and symposiarch, as a library reader, and especially as an author and translator, several of whose works have been published by Dumbarton Oaks.

Born in Somerville, Massachusetts, in 1923, George Dennis moved with his family to southern California as a teenager and graduated from Santa Monica High School in 1941. That same year, at the age of 17, he became a novice of the Society of Jesus at the Sacred Heart Novitiate in Los Gatos, California. He studied classics and philosophy at Santa Clara University and at Gonzaga University in Spokane, from which he received his B.A. in 1947. After teaching Latin and Greek for three years at St. Ignatius High School in San Francisco, he continued his education at Alma College in Los Gatos (now the Jesuit School of Theology in Santa Clara) and received his Licentiate in Sacred Theology in 1955, one year after he was ordained to the priesthood.

With strong training in classical languages and theology, Fr. George next embarked on doctoral studies at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome. But before he started classes in Rome the Jesuits sent him to

Florence for Italian language training and pastoral work at a reform school; he also spent some time working with orphans on a US Air Force base in Casablanca, Morocco. The move to Italy was to change forever the direction of Fr. George's scholarship. In Rome in 1956 he began to study with the legendary Père Raymond Loenertz, a Dominican priest from Luxembourg who was a specialist on fourteenth-century Byzantium, especially the relations between Greeks and Latins. Fr. Loenertz used to lecture in Latin at the Pontifical Institute, and his understanding of the difficult Greek of the Palaiologan period was superb. He also communicated to his students his enthusiasm for the discovery and editing of medieval manuscripts. Fr. George had further opportunity to work with manuscripts when he spent a semester studying Byzantine philology at the University of Munich, attending seminars with Franz Dölger during his final year of teaching. In Rome Fr. George also took classes with Joseph Gill, the expert on the Council of Florence.

Thus it is not surprising that Fr. George chose as his special subject the final period of Byzantine history and prepared his doctoral dissertation on the five-year reign of Manuel II Palaiologos, future emperor of Byzantium, as an independent emperor in Thessalonike between 1382 and 1387. This dissertation, published as a monograph in Rome in 1960,¹ remains to this day an essential source for the biography of Manuel and

1 *The Reign of Manuel II Palaeologus in Thessalonica, 1382–1387* (Rome, 1960).

for the history of Thessalonike just prior to its first capture by the Ottoman Turks, in 1387. As Fr. George himself notes in the foreword, before his research this five-year period remained “a closed chapter” in the life of Manuel. By meticulous examination of numerous documents, many of them unedited, including letter collections, he was able to weave together a narrative of the events of these crucial years.

After completing his doctorate, Fr. George returned to California, where he taught at Loyola University in Los Angeles from 1961 to 1966. He then moved to the Catholic University of America, where he was to spend the rest of his teaching career, much beloved by his students, several of whom have gone on to careers as Byzantine historians. He delivered lively lectures, and used to bring to class bits of chain mail and helmets, as well as toy soldiers and miniature siege equipment, to demonstrate battle strategy and siege tactics. When showing a rendering of the tenth-century Byzantine throne with its *automata* of lions and birds, he would add a sound track of roaring lions for effect. He wore his learning lightly and was a modest man, commuting to campus by bicycle and often arriving with hair disheveled by the wind. He was generous in sharing his knowledge with students—and not only his own—in pointing out arcane secondary bibliography and primary sources, and in deciphering difficult words in a manuscript. At the annual Byzantine Studies Conference, he always made a point of meeting graduate students and showing interest in their research.

During the 1960s and 1970s Fr. George produced an impressive list of articles, primarily on late Byzantine history. He also decided to concentrate his efforts on the editing and translation of Byzantine texts, to make them more widely available to both scholars and the general public. His main focus during these years continued to be Manuel II, in particular the critical edition and translation of the fascinating correspondence of this Byzantine emperor, published by Dumbarton Oaks in 1977.² In the late 1970s Fr. George’s scholarship shifted dramatically, to the study of Byzantine military treatises, for which he is best known. Fr. George’s predecessor at Catholic University, Monsignor Martin Higgins, had written his doctoral dissertation in 1939 on the Persian war of the emperor Maurice (r. 582–602), but never published it. At his death in 1969 he left

behind an unfinished edition of the Greek text of the *Strategikon*, a military treatise attributed by some to Maurice. Fr. George took it upon himself to finish this work and in 1981 published it in the Vienna series of the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, accompanied by a German translation by Ernst Gamillscheg.³ A few years later, in 1984, he published his own English translation of this text.⁴

The next year there appeared his critical edition and translation of three anonymous Byzantine military treatises, one of the sixth century and two from the tenth.⁵ They deal with strategy, skirmishing, and campaign organization and tactics. Fr. George was interested in not only the information these texts provided on Byzantine tactics, but also their insights into daily life. As he writes in his introduction, “These three treatises . . . written in a . . . down-to-earth language, introduce us to real people—the retired officer with his collection of books on strategy, the hardened veteran from the mountains far from the imperial capital, the efficient administrator who sees to every detail. They tell us of soldiers that are more interested in farming and of others that are harassed by tax collectors. . . . Not only do they discuss the practical measures taken to defend the empire, but they give us an insight into what motivated the men that stood guard on its borders.”⁶

In 1994 in honor of Fr. George’s seventieth birthday, some of his students and colleagues prepared a Festschrift entitled *Peace and War in Byzantium*.⁷ As the editors pointed out in their preface, despite Fr. George’s longstanding interest in warfare, he was at heart a “vigorous advocate of peace and an opponent of unnecessary violence,”⁸ and they therefore thought it important to include the topic of peace as well in the collection of articles. Fr. George himself liked to quote the emperor Leo VI, who wrote in his preface to the

3 G. T. Dennis and E. Gamillscheg, *Das Strategikon des Maurikios* (Vienna, 1981).

4 *Maurice’s Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (Philadelphia, PA, 1984).

5 *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, DC, 1985, repr. 2008, 2009).

6 *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, viii.

7 T. S. Miller and J. W. Nesbitt, eds., *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.* (Washington, DC, 1994). This volume contains a list of George Dennis’s publications up to 1994.

8 *Peace and War in Byzantium*, x.

2 *The Letters of Manuel II Palaeologus* (Washington, DC, 1977).

Taktika, “all men ought to embrace peace and foster love for one another instead of taking up murderous weapons in their hands to use against their own kind.”⁹

Fr. George’s third major scholarly interest was Byzantine rhetoric. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he devoted several years to the preparation of a critical edition of some of the rhetorical works of Michael Psellos, for the Teubner series directed by the late Leendert Westerink. Fr. George agreed to edit the panegyric orations and the *Orationes forenses et acta*, and with the help of a Dumbarton Oaks fellowship he fulfilled his commitment in amazingly short time, publishing the two volumes in 1994.¹⁰

Fr. George used the library of Dumbarton Oaks throughout the thirty-five years he spent in Washington, and, as already reported, he published in mid-career two volumes in the Washington series of the Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, also known as the Dumbarton Oaks Texts series: *The Letters of Manuel II Palaeologus* in 1977 and *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* in 1985. Both titles have proved to be Dumbarton Oaks best-sellers and have gone through several printings. *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, reprinted in a paperback edition in 2008 and again in 2009, continually posts impressive sales figures, remarkable for a book that first appeared twenty-five years ago!

In the 1980s he served as one of the principal translators in the Dumbarton Oaks *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents* project, contributing the translations of thirteen separate documents.¹¹ He focused on *typika* from Mount Athos ranging from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, as well as important rules from the Palaiologan period, such as the rule of Athanasios of Meteora for the monastery of the Transfiguration, two rules of Michael VIII Palaiologos for Mt. St. Auxentios and for St. Demetrios of the Palaiologoi-Kellibara in Constantinople, and for this latter monastery a rule of Andronikos II as well.

In his later years, especially after his retirement from teaching at Catholic University, Fr. George

became even more involved with Dumbarton Oaks. As already mentioned, he held a fellowship from 1990 to 1991 to work on his edition of the panegyric orations of Psellos, and he served as a Senior Fellow from 1995 to 2001. During this period he participated in a remarkable number of Dumbarton Oaks symposia: “Law and Society in Byzantium” (1992), “Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204” (1994), “The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World” (1997), and “Late Byzantine Thessalonike” (2001). In addition in 1999, together with Ioli Kalavrezou, he was co-symposiarch of “Byzantine Eschatology: Views on Death and the Last Things.” Fr. George was a faithful member of the weekly medieval Greek reading group in the 1990s, and in that context he played an important role in the revision of the draft translation of the *History of Leo the Deacon* by myself and Denis Sullivan. Fr. George’s insightful comments on military terminology were most helpful, and led to his eventual collaboration (along with his former student Stamatina McGrath) in the preparation of the annotation. Fr. George was also one of the original faculty members of the summer school in Byzantine Greek, inaugurated in 2000, at which he taught sessions on books of military tactics, the letters of Psellos, and paleography.

Although he was a Jesuit for 68 years, Fr. George rarely wore a clerical collar, preferring blue jeans and plaid shirts. One reason for this casual garb was to put at ease his students, as well as the disadvantaged teenagers of Washington, DC, to whom he devoted so much of his spare time, playing football and even helping to organize youth initiatives such as summer rock concert series and job fairs. These teenagers had no idea of his scholarly background, calling him simply “George,” and he preferred it that way. His easy camaraderie with high school and college students helped him to retain a youthful outlook, even when facing the disabilities of his final years. At the same time he was devoted to the “old ladies” of a local retirement home where he regularly celebrated Mass on Sundays.

Fr. George experienced serious health problems during the final decade of his life, especially after suffering a massive stroke in 2000, which deprived him of the use of his right hand and made it difficult for him to walk. In 2001 he returned to California, to a position as adjunct professor of history at Loyola Marymount, where he had begun his teaching career. In 2005 declining health forced him to move to the

9 G. T. Dennis, ed., *The Taktika of Leo VI* (Washington, DC, 2010), 3–5, slightly modified.

10 G. T. Dennis, ed., *Orationes panegyricae* (Stuttgart, 1994) and *Orationes forenses et acta* (Stuttgart, 1994).

11 J. Thomas and A. C. Hero, eds., *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents*, 5 vols. (Washington, DC, 2000).

Jesuit retirement home in Los Gatos, the town where he had first become a novice. Here, despite increasing physical handicaps, he persevered in the completion of his magnum opus, the edition and translation of the *Taktika* of the emperor Leo VI. Remarkably he was able to submit an approximately 1,000-page manuscript to Dumbarton Oaks in 2007. With much assistance from the Dumbarton Oaks publications office and the able editorial interventions of John Duffy and John Haldon the book was prepared for the press and published three years later, in 2010. The hefty volume of the *Taktika* represents Fr. George's fourth contribution to the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* (three of them in the Washington series), a truly extraordinary achievement. It is a cause for regret that Fr. George did not live long enough to hold the printed volume in his hands, but he was able to check the final page proofs and could die assured that the book would soon appear in print.

George Dennis died on 7 March 2010, in San Jose, California, at the age of 86. A few weeks later, on April

30, at the beginning of the Dumbarton Oaks symposium on "Warfare in the Byzantine World," tribute was made to him as one of the leading twentieth-century scholars of Byzantine military strategy and tactics, and the conference was dedicated to his memory. Throughout the weekend Fr. George was present in spirit as papers were read on numerous themes that his research and publications had done so much to elucidate, and which his translations have made available to a wider public.

✦ I am grateful to those who have provided information for this obituary, particularly two of George Dennis's students, Timothy Miller and Stamatina McGrath, and Kathleen Sparkes of the Dumbarton Oaks Publications Office. I should like to render particular thanks to Reed Heisley-Shellaby, a student at Loyola Marymount University, whose November 2007 interview with Fr. George provided invaluable materials for the biographical essay he wrote in 2008. His professor, Margaret Trenchard-Smith, kindly made his paper available to me.